

*WASHINGTON, DC (November 18, 2010) – Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-IL) released the following statement in response to Gerda Weissmann Klein becoming a recipient of the Presidential Medal of Honor. Weissmann Klein survived the Holocaust, which resulted in the extermination of 6 million Jews. In July, Congresswoman Schakowsky wrote a letter to President Obama encouraging him to honor Gerda Weissmann Klein with the award.*

I am deeply moved by the announcement that Gerda Weissmann Klein, Holocaust survivor, memoirist, and philanthropist, has been named a recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom. I wholeheartedly support President Obama's decision to honor Weissmann Klein with the highest civilian award. Her voice of peace and tolerance in the wake of her survival of the Nazi concentration camps has ensured a lasting record of the horrors of World War II and Nazism. She is a living reminder and warning to us all that we must not repeat the sins of history.

Gerda, a Jew, was fifteen years old when German soldiers invaded Poland. In the southern Polish town where she and her family lived, Gerda and her parents were forced to live in the basement of their home for three years while her brother Artur was taken by the German army. In 1942, Gerda's parents were sent to Auschwitz while she endured the rest of the war moving between forced-labor camps. Her ordeal ended with a forced 300-mile death march with other prisoners as the Germans tried to escape the advancing American army. She was one of very few to survive the march and was liberated by American soldiers in September 1945.

Soon after, Gerda married one of the soldiers who liberated her. Kurt Klein, an American lieutenant, was himself a Jewish émigré who escaped Germany early in the war. She moved with him to Buffalo, New York, where they raised a family and began speaking out about their experiences during the war.

Together, Gerda and Kurt established the Gerda and Kurt Klein Foundation with a mission to create “the opportunity for young people to understand the world and translate that understanding into positive action.” The foundation teaches tolerance to children and encourages community service. Through the foundation, Gerda has worked tirelessly to fight hunger, violence, and intolerance and engaged young people through community service and social action.

Gerda authored eight books including her memoir, *All But My Life*, which inspired the Academy-Award winning documentary film,

*One Survivor Remembers*

. Her story is also captured in the film

*Testimony*

, a permanent exhibit at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. In 1997, President Clinton appointed her to the museum’s governing council.

Her voice has reminded Americans and the world about the value of freedom. She encourages people to appreciate their freedoms, big and small, from freedom of speech to the freedom to spend “a boring evening at home.”

I believe Gerda Weissmann Klein's voice for tolerance and love, for peace and commitment to service, and for remembering our past to ensure our future freedom deserves this highest civilian award, the Presidential Medal of Freedom. I am overjoyed that our country has recognized her in this way.